

Not Getting Late Early Enough

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This presidential election is beginning to have a strange feel to it. All the big picture signals, the weak economy, frustration with the war in Iraq, dissatisfaction with President Bush and Democratic strength in congressional contests across the country indicate that Barack Obama should be able to win, if not in a landslide, than at least decisively.

These are not the only indicators that favor Obama. The Republicans must feel some sense of buyer's remorse as John McCain increasingly does not seem up to the challenge of a presidential campaign. McCain's awkwardness, frequent inability to answer questions clearly and accurately, and seeming inability to excite Republicans have made only made Obama's chances look better. Other peripheral indicators such as voter registration numbers in key states like Florida and the number of formerly solidly red states that look to be in play for Obama this year, also seem to favor the Democratic candidate.

For some reason, however, the national polls seem to be stuck. Other than the *Newsweek* poll of a few weeks ago, almost all the major polls have shown Obama stuck with a lead of between 2-6 points. This must be very frustrating for the Obama campaign as it seems like no matter how many things go their way, or how many breaks they get, they cannot get any real breathing room in the polls. The campaign has the feel of a baseball game where one team keeps getting hits and runners on base, but can't seem to get ahead by more than a run or two.

National polls in a presidential election are of more heuristic than actual strategic value because presidents are not elected in national elections. Nonetheless, these polls are a good way to measure the momentum and trends in a presidential race, as well as the overall mood of the electorate. Moreover, in the overwhelming majority of presidential elections winner of the popular vote has become president.

So far, the national numbers indicate that even with all the big picture signs favoring the Democrats, the country remains reasonably divided on partisan lines. Obama's efforts to transcend partisanship and introduce a new kind of politics notwithstanding, this election has relatively quickly become, in many respects, one between a conservative Republican and a liberal Democrat. McCain's numbers in most polls are between 43-46% while Obama is usually between 45-48%. This suggests that the stories about the trouble McCain has with the Republican base belie the data which seems to indicate that both parties have consolidated their base already, leaving very few undecided voters and that anger and frustration with Bush has not yet translated into support for Obama.

A 2-6 point popular vote lead on Election Day would almost certainly mean a victory for Obama, but the inability of Obama's campaign to move these numbers is not a comforting sign. Accordingly, the concern in the Obama camp should be that given how difficult it has been, even

with all the signals pointing in the right direction, to open up a broader lead, what will happen if some of these signals begin to change?

It is certainly possible that McCain will never find his sea legs as a candidate, that he will make a bad choice for his running mate, that the war in Iraq will continue to be seen as a failure, that Bush's popularity will not recover slightly, that the economy will get worse and that Obama will continue to avoid making any significant mistakes, but the Obama campaign clearly can't build a campaign around these assumptions. A 2-6 point race can change very quickly due to an international incident, selection of a running mate, misstatement by a candidate, or even a diplomatic or political triumph by the incumbent party. Should any of these things happen, or even if McCain should simply become a better candidate, this race could get very close very quickly. It is likely, of course, that at least one of these things will happen during the next four months.

The challenge for Obama's campaign is to change the dynamic of the race before something breaks McCain's way and tightens the polls. To continue the baseball analogy, the Obama campaign may be up by a run or two now, but it is only the 5th inning. It is still early enough for a game changing hit from either side. Therefore, freezing the race for four months is a very difficult and risky strategy. If, when there is one month remaining, the numbers have not moved, then a cautious approach from Obama will be best.

Until that time, a strategy that is too risk averse will maintain Obama's vulnerability to an event or development that would favor McCain. Obama must try to create that moment or image that finally brings those voters who are tired of Bush but not yet ready to support a Democrat, to his side. This requires a strategic approach that is still open to risk taking and to new ideas.

During the primary campaign, Obama had a way of keeping his opponent off balance by announcing major endorsements at just the right moment. This is more difficult in a general election where few endorsements are unexpected or make news for more than 24 hours. However, figuring out how to leverage whatever remaining news making endorsements, or other major campaign announcements into lasting political gain is an essential challenge for Obama and his team.

If Obama is unable to do these things, we are in for a very tense four months as even a slight improvement by McCain could lead to deadlocked polls, reversal of some of the peripheral indicators which favor Obama and another election which will be decided in the last days.